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United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Research Administration
Bureau of Animal Industry

X HOMING PIGEONS; THEIR CARE AND TRAINING X

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Homing pigeons have a wonderful ability to return to their homes, which is made use of for messenger service as well as for a sport. Remarkable records of endurance and speed have been made by such pigeons. The ability to return home is a very remarkable trait and has been so developed that individual birds have returned home from a distance of more than 1,000 miles in two days, and flights of over 600 miles in a single day have been made. This development of the homing instinct is the result of both breeding and training, each of which is an important factor in the work.

Selection of Stock

To make a success in the flying of homing pigeons, it is important to procure stock which has performed well in competitive flights. It does not pay to breed from stray birds or birds of unknown parentage as it takes about three years to determine the qualifications of a good homing pigeon. There is no standard color for homing pigeons, and color is not considered in selection and breeding except that white birds are undesirable because they can be readily seen by hawks. The eyes should be prominent and bright. The eye is covered with three lids, the first one being used in storms and head winds; the bird can close this lid and still continue its flight. The wing is the most essential part of a pigeon that is to be used for record flying. A pigeon has 12 tail flight feathers, consisting of 2 sets of 6, and has 10 primary and 10 secondary flight feathers in the wing.

Pigeons mate in pairs and usually remain true to their respective mates as long as they are together. Natural mating, or allowing the pigeons to select their own mates is the method commonly followed in breeding homing pigeons. They should not be allowed to breed until they are well developed, preferably nearly a year old. Pigeons make the best breeders when they are from 1 to 3 years old. A strong constitution and plenty of vigor are absolutely essential in the selection of flying pigeons, and all matings should furnish these characteristics. The mating and selection should be based primarily on performance rather than on relationship. The best performers are usually those from the first hatch, which is in April, although those hatched during the other spring months often make excellent records. Seventeen days are required to hatch pigeon eggs. Many of the greatest winners have been bred from yearlings and 2-year-old birds. Good records are made by yearlings, but the best flights usually are by 2- and 3-year-old birds; very few races are won after the third or fourth year.

Selection for Races

Only birds which are in the best feather condition should be selected for racing. The wing should be full, having 10 primary flights that are closely held together, and the neck should have a good sheen. Molting is very important in homing pigeons, as the condition of the feathers is such an important factor in flying. Molting is affected by the season that the bird is hatched, as well as by the management and feeding. Pigeons should have completed the molt before they are to be flown in a race, which makes it very essential to note the feather condition and molting of the bird a considerable time before the race. The time of mating has a marked influence on the selection of birds for racing, so that careful records of the dates when the birds mate and lay should be kept. Those which have eggs or squabs in the nest will have an added reason for returning home. Females often make the best racers, but it is essential to fly them only when they are in the proper breeding or mating stage. Male birds should not be sent away for flying at the time they are driving their mates. Old birds will lay again when their young are from 3 to 4 weeks old and will feed their squabs until they are 4 or 5 weeks old.

Training

Training is as essential as breeding in the successful management of homing pigeons. The birds should be taught a very little at a time and should become thoroughly acquainted with that before additional training is given. Home to the racing pigeon must mean the place where it gets good attention and plenty of feed. The birds should be first left out of the loft in the evening when about 5 weeks old, and young pigeons should become thoroughly acquainted with the surroundings about the loft before they are taken away. It is desirable to fly the birds twice each day--as early in the morning and as late in the evening as possible. Birds should be released in a hungry condition, so that they will come back for feed after flying for about half an hour. The traps in the pigeon loft should be left open so that the birds will be able to go in and feed immediately upon landing on the loft.

Pigeons are taken away for their first distance flight or "toss" after they have been flying from 6 to 8 weeks about the loft. They should be put into a carrying basket on the previous night to accustom them to the basket. Take the basket about 1 mile away from home the next morning and release the birds without giving them any feed so that they will be hungry. Release them one at a time, using great care in getting them out of the basket, letting them go very carefully. Repeat this procedure several days later by putting the birds into the basket early in the morning and taking them 2 miles away from the loft in the direction in which they are to make their competitive flights. The next flight should be a collective toss, all the birds being released together at a distance of 5 miles from the loft, the pigeons always being hungry when released so that they will return home. Very careful training for short distances, especially for the first 5 or 10 miles, is essential for best results. The distance can then be increased rapidly to 10, 15, 20, 25, 50, 75, and 100 miles, the training up to 25 miles being most important.

When the birds return to the loft, while being trained, they should be taught to go in quickly so that there will be no delay in timing them in a race. Some method of training the pigeons at feeding time, such as rattling feed in a can or whistling, should be used so they will know that this signal means that they are to be fed and will come into the loft immediately. Birds, both in

training and in races, should be fed immediately upon returning to the loft and also should have fresh water. If there is no fresh water for birds when they return from a race, they are likely to stop on the road to get water during the race.

The Racing of Pigeons

Pigeon races are conducted through organized pigeon associations, the local associations having charge of the details of each race. Practically every local association belongs to some national association. Birds for racing must be in perfect feather condition, and the selection of the right birds for the race is very essential to success. Before the young birds are entered in their first race, they should be fed and watered in the training crate or basket.

The distance the pigeons will cover in one day depends on the weather as well as on their breeding and training. Pigeons ordinarily fly from daylight until dark, so that in a long-distance race it is very essential that they be released as early in the day as possible. Young birds in good weather will fly about 300 miles in from 7 to 9 hours, and old birds will cover about 500 miles in one day. Each local association appoints a race committee which is directly in charge of the details of each race. The seamless-band numbers of the pigeons to be entered in the race are recorded on the race sheet, and the birds are then turned over to the race committee. Clocks used for timing homing pigeons are owned by each member and have to be turned in to the racing committee, where they are properly set, sealed, and returned to the owner before the race. When the birds return home during the race they are trapped and the association's counter-mark removed from their legs and placed in the clock.

Management

Homing pigeons are fed a mixture of whole grains and seeds and do not give good results on feeds commonly used for chickens. Commercial mixed pigeon feeds, consisting of Canada peas, small corn, kafir, hempseed, vetch, canary and other seeds are generally used for these birds. During the racing season the best pigeon feed mixtures containing a considerable quantity of peas and some of the higher priced seeds are fed. Breeding birds are usually fed a cheaper pigeon mixture. Feed for breeders may be kept before the birds all the time, while feed for the flying birds is usually given by hand twice daily in shallow hoppers or on the floor. Pigeon grit should be kept before the pigeons and plenty of fresh drinking water should be supplied. The drinking vessels are usually arranged so that the birds can not get into them and dirty the water. Pans of water for bathing are generally used 2 or 3 days weekly in summer and once or twice a week in the winter; they are emptied after they have been in use for 3 or 4 hours.

The loft for the pigeons should be arranged for convenience in handling the birds and so that it may be easily cleaned. It should be divided into 2 or more sections, one for young birds and one for the older ones. A double nest about 15 inches high, 12 inches wide, and 30 inches long is provided for each pair of breeders, in which two nest bowls are placed. Small outside aviaries or wire-covered pens may be attached to the house, but homing pigeons are usually allowed to fly outside almost every day. A series of wires in a frame, making what is called a "bob" wire, is generally used in the front of the loft, preferably just above the aviary, through which the pigeons enter to get into the loft, but are unable to get out from the pen, as the wires only open into the loft. Thus the pigeons can come in at any time but can not go out. The openings should be arranged so that other animals can not get into the loft. A small catching pen is usually built just inside this opening so that pigeons can be quickly caught when they enter the loft after a race or while in training.

